

‘They made a demonstrable difference’: senior women’s efforts to redefine higher education management

Based on a paper presented by
Dr Colleen Chesterman, National Director,
Australian Technology Network Women’s Executive Development Program
Contact: colleen.chesterman@uts.edu.au

At Australian Higher Education Industrial Association Conference
Adelaide
26 March 2004

Acknowledgments and thanks to co-researchers Dr Anne Ross-Smith (UTS) and
Dr Margaret Peters (UniSA) for their contributions to this paper

Background

The research project Senior Women Executives and the Cultures of Management on which we draw in this paper investigated the experience of women in senior managerial positions, what supported and sustained them and the impact their presence had had on the management cultures. The project capitalized on the opportunity that in some Australian organizations there were a significant number and proportion of women at senior levels of management and many had been in these positions for a significant period of time.

The project had three major objectives:

- (1) To provide an in-depth analysis of the lived experience of women at senior executive levels.
- (2) To identify, document and evaluate extrinsic (work/family policies) and intrinsic (cultural, relational and deep-structural) factors that support and sustain women in senior managerial roles.
- (3) To investigate the extent to which the presence of senior women in substantial numbers has transformed managerial cultures in selected organizations.

The project involved organisations that were acknowledged leaders in the promotion of women to senior positions, namely five universities; twelve public service departments in five states and two major financial institutions. Senior management was defined by the use of the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency (previously the Affirmative Action Agency, AAA) categories of Tier 1, Tier 2 and Tier 3 managers¹ (AAA, 1995). The organisations had around 30% of senior positions occupied by women.

¹ Tier 3 Management level includes those managers who are responsible for the formulation of programs and policies and assume accountability for financial, employment and human resource aspects of a specific work area. Tier 2 Management level is responsible for leadership and strategic direction and supervises Tier 3 Managers. Tier 1

255 interviews were completed, with 168 women and 87 men. The breakdown across the three sectors was as follows:

Private Sector		Public Sector		Higher Education	
72		102		81	
Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
21	51	35	67	31	50

Tapes of semi-structured interviews averaging 55 minutes were transcribed and analysed. Ely's (1995) study of the effect of women's representation at senior levels in organisations on their gender and gender identity, which used direct quotes from interviews to illustrate participant's perceptions and experiences, provided a useful precedent in developing a strategy for representing the data. Following this approach, direct quotes are similarly used to emphasise, highlight or illustrate a particular finding.

One major focus of the research was to explore if organisations where women had achieved promotion to, and where they remained in, senior positions, had particular cultural characteristics that supported and sustained women. Universities around Australia have over the past 20 years been encouraged by government equity legislation to adopt a proactive stance towards the promotion of women into senior management. The 5 universities involved in this research have had success, not only in promoting women to senior positions, but also in keeping many women in senior positions over a period of time, and indeed seeing women promoted to more senior positions. The question is therefore: what are the organisational characteristics and/or the cultural aspects of these high-performing universities that have supported women in maintaining these positions? Across all 5 universities there was unanimity about the factors that encouraged women to apply for senior positions and that sustained and supported them in those positions. These were clear support from organisational leaders, a critical mass of other women in senior positions, opportunities to network and strong statements on values. These were also named by interviewees from the two other sectors, but women from younger age groups than those in universities also identified flexible and family friendly policies as important for them.

The participants

In the 5 universities 81 interviews took place. 50 of these were with senior women, 31 were with senior men. The selection of those to be interviewed was negotiated between the research team and representatives from Human Resources and Equity Units. The final selection often depended on the availability of those approached at a time when members of the research team were in the relevant city. The interviews took place between November 2001 and October 2002. Interviews ranged from 45 to 60 minutes in length, with some lasting over an hour.

Management is defined as having ultimate control of the organization and usually there would only be one person in that category in each organization.

Over the time period when interviews took place, universities restructured or senior staff retired. As a result 6 Vice-Chancellors were interviewed. Some interviews took place with people who then moved to more senior positions either within the university or in a couple of cases to other universities. In a limited number of cases those interviewed had just retired, either from the university or from the senior position that they held. Others retired during the course of the project.

The majority of those interviewed were in senior positions. This was defined as Deans or above in the academic stream, Directors and above in the administrative stream. In a couple of cases interviews were held with Heads of School or deputy administrators; this occurred in consultation with the contacts at each university who suggested that there were significant reasons for selecting that person – for example a woman Head of School in a male-dominated discipline.

Of those interviewed, 46 were academics, 24 men and 22 women. 35 were in administrative, support or general staff positions. 28 of these were women and only 7 were men. The high proportion of women general staff interviewed reflected the high proportion of women in the senior administrative staff, particularly at one institution, at the time of the interviews.

There were some difficult questions of definition in job descriptions. In DEST data, senior academic administrators are defined as general staff. For this analysis, because of the different career paths that emerged between academic and general staff, it was decided to describe all those senior academic administrators (Vice-Chancellors, Deputy and Pro Vice Chancellors and Deans) as academics if they had come from an academic background. The descriptor administrative staff refers to those who had worked in 'non-academic' positions.

A Question of Cultures

In this paper I wish to explore if the organisations where women had remained in senior positions had experienced a change in culture or more colloquially speaking 'the way things are done'. Past experience by the research team in studying organisational culture suggested the term 'culture' was often misunderstood. One of the reasons for this was the popularisation of this term during the 1980s and 1990s by management gurus such as Peters and Waterman (1982) and its subsequent adoption as part of mainstream organisational jargon. This meant that 'culture' was often interpreted in highly subjective ways.

It is important to realise that in most organisations aspects of culture frequently operate at a deeply unconscious level. Yet Bacchi (1998:78) reminds us that "cultures do not spring ready-made from above: people make cultures."

In the present research, participants were asked to talk about their organisations culture from the perspective of 'its way of doing things'. Participants often grappled with the concepts of culture in a strictly theoretical sense, but were very clear about what they saw cultures as being in practice. It was also quite clear in many cases that there was a perception in the organisation that cultures had changed significantly in recent years.

Many prominent organisational theorists have seen cultures of organisations as carrying deeply gendered messages. Burton (1997: 17), for example, criticised the “masculine culture” of institutions, which she defined as reflecting not only values and priorities but also the structural arrangements in which they became embedded. She identified “employment terms and conditions, policies, practices and reward structures (that) historically have been organised around the cluster of characteristics, attributes and background circumstances typical of men”.

In a study of banking in the United Kingdom, Liff and Ward (2001) specifically identified culture as a critical issue. They asked why the corporate goal in the UK banking industry of having 30% women managers by 2000 was not accomplished despite a policy of equal opportunity. Liff and Ward argued that the reasons had to be found in a link between the cultural context of organisations and individual decisions. They found that at all levels managers’ understanding of the promotion process shaped, or ‘gendered’, their own career orientation in two regards. First, the promotions process was understood by men and women to reward characteristics and behaviours that were much more problematic for women than for men. Second, people anticipated conflict between senior management positions and active parenting. Liff and Ward argued as a result that the “dominant organisational model of those who will succeed is strongly sex-typed male.” What the equality approach failed to do “is to expose the current organisation of the workplace as built around, and hence favouring, male needs and ways of working.” The focus of equity work had to deal with the fact that the promotions process and family responsibilities were cultural characteristics that discriminated against women’s individual decisions to seek promotion.

The focus of the discussion in this research project was on the cultures that operated at senior management levels. Was it possible for women in senior jobs to change cultures. In summary participants saw cultures changing when women held significant positional power, in terms of methods of collaboration, consultation, decision-making, increased friendliness and approachability and the increased focus on staff and students.

Billing and Alvesson (2000) suggested that women managers are often seen to be able to especially contribute to the following aspects of leadership - communication and co-operation, affiliation and attachment, power, and intimacy and nurturing. This is not to suggest that in some uniquely female way women per se possess the characteristics and skills to bring about cultural change. To do so is to invite charges of essentialism (McNay, 1992) and at the same time to trivialise the complexity of changing an organisation’s culture. It would be problematic if research assumed a similarity among women, of fixed or true identities and talents. But as Billing and Alvesson (2000: 149) further argued the “possible increase in numbers of female managers will be fused by many other changes, including changes in orientations and identities of women, before, as well as when, entering and working in managerial positions”. The idea of a fixed identity and ‘women only’ talents is misleading. Moreover women have entered management in significant numbers at a time when characteristics often seen as ‘feminine’ such as collaboration, team working and consensus building have also come to be associated with new and more effective ways of managing.

Meyerson and Ely (2003) go even further and suggest it is not sufficient to just add different perspectives (ie those of women and other diversity groups) to effect change in management cultures but to change what constitutes leadership. People, they suggest, “must be able to use their cultural identity differences – which give rise to different life experiences, knowledge and insights - to inform alternative views about their work and how best to accomplish it.”(138)

Male and Female Management Styles

First let me sound a warning:

Expectations of how women and men managed were understood in deeply gendered ways and the behaviours appropriate to each gender were widely accepted. Both women and men had strong views as to what constituted male and female management styles. Some male leaders were described as having ‘female management styles’ which sometimes was associated with wanting to avoid conflict. In fact, such stereotypes must be interrogated. Management that is collaborative and consensual may be described as ‘feminist’ in philosophy, but can be practised equally by men and women.

It is in this light that we present some of the views expressed by women and men interviewed in our study. Here for example is a female Dean’s view of her female VC:

The perception of the (female) Vice-Chancellor would be of a very strong leader, you know. But that strength is defined differently from the way the previous Vice-Chancellor handled it. He would have been described as a strong leader too; I mean his style came from a different model as an engineer, fairly hierarchical ...

Another interviewee described a previous male Vice-Chancellor as showing the traditional pattern of heroic and hierarchical leadership: “he was everyone’s key enemy”.

One man interviewed demonstrated a more complex understanding of management styles and of how they were repertoires that could be enacted by both men and women:

... there’s no doubt that she (the-Vice Chancellor) brings something to it, which is theoretically the kind of practice that one would hope would come from feminism. Not all our female managers practice feminist leadership. Some of our men do it better. Now to me, that’s the more crucial thing. In many ways it’s a question of are you inclusive, do you respect diversity. We have the unfortunate experience of some of our most bullying managers have actually, surprisingly enough, been women. And I think in the end to me it’s whether they have accepted feminist positions on things and internalised those and tried to work through them. I think that’s what we try to do. I mean we don’t always succeed but we try. (Male PVC)

One male Vice-Chancellor strongly emphasised the importance of having a male and a female in the two senior positions, as in this way they balanced each other's management style. Another man, a PVC, described an organisation where he had seen the women CEO demonstrate 'male' characteristics of firmness and aggression, while her male Deputy was more consultative and conciliatory. These gendered understandings should not be accepted at face value, rather they should be discussed in the light of what forms of leadership an organisation requires.

A Director of Equity described how she saw the differences between stereotypes of male and female management styles played out in her organisation. The traditional male style was defined as:

people working long hours, people not having close relationships with people they work with, people handing orders down from on high. I guess the whole culture of the leader being removed from the people they work with... and I guess I wouldn't want to essentialise that as the male management style but would possibly feel more comfortable calling it a more traditional style. That hasn't been my experience as a manager and maybe it is partly to do with the function that I manage but I have had to work in a hands-on way with people in my unit. Very much a servant-leader rather than somebody standing out. Handing on orders from on high just wouldn't be tolerated in the culture of the area I work in (or) to have someone who operated in that more traditional management style.

Before looking in detail at some research findings, it is worth noting that this project revealed that, contrary to much of the literature on gender and organisational culture undertaken in the last decade which positions women as having little influence on dominant and usually highly masculinist organisational cultures, women particularly those at CEO level were seen to be quite influential in affecting cultural change. It was also quite clear in organisations that had women as senior executives that there was a perception these women actively sought to change the cultures of their organisations. From the point of view of most senior women and men interviewed, it was found that when women gained and more importantly retained senior positions in significant numbers, both men and women developed a sense of ease and comfort with each other. This in turn enabled more cooperative and collegial forms of management to emerge. Almost all of the women valued management styles that encouraged collaboration and consultation, built consensus, encouraged teamwork, made decisions transparent, and removed 'silos'. Women did not necessarily push themselves forward but worked with their colleagues to reach the goals.

Collaboration

Collaboration was emphasised. There was a shared view among the senior women that it was important for a leader to set a vision and to establish a culture that enabled people to work towards more cooperative styles of leadership. This was an approach that built collaboration and relied on trust with peers, as this senior female administrator showed:

I did not go upfront and ‘Now that I was Director therefore I was powerful and we had to work in a particular way’. I very much decided I would have to network and, by my behaviour, demonstrate that I was a leader in my area and what this role of Director meant. And I think it did surprise some of my male colleagues and superiors that in fact I saw it that way. But because I think I proceeded in a leadership way and included them in where I was going, they in fact then accepted that. And that, I think, is different than perhaps some of my male colleagues who, by virtue of their title, assume power and then believe people will come in and recognise their positions as powerful positions rather than perhaps by example and by input and by networking and engagement, lead people to see that it is a role of influence and power. So I think yes it is different - and certainly was different.

Another senior-level female administrator approved of a shared sense of purpose among the senior executives of a university with a high proportion of senior females, particularly on the administrative side. She had an awareness of the strategic goals of working together:

And anecdotally this university’s culture is much more supportive, much more... I guess less, to use a horrible expression, silo-based than many other institutions. I find talking to my peers, there is much more (collaboration) ... As the VC says, we move as a pack ...

A common theme of the interviews with women was their emphasis on the importance of good relationships with those with whom they worked, both for themselves and the organisation. They saw transparency and openness as closely related to building teams, based on respect for the individuals in them. Women described themselves as being able to work with people to assist them find solutions. They would refer to their lack of ego in that they did not want to claim their successes as individual achievements. They did not feel that they needed to win all points or have all credit given to them. This trait, called “inclusive leadership” is discussed in detail by Eveline (2004) in a book on the impact of Fay Gale’s term as Vice-Chancellor at University of Western Australia. This is described by the female Director of an academic centre:

... Someone reported back to me this afternoon, one of my staff in this area about me, I thought it was actually quite a nice compliment: you don’t work for S, you work with her. So I like them to think that I work alongside everybody and we achieve things together but having said that unless you know where you’re going, then you can achieve a lot of busy activity and you get nowhere.

In these interviews many women emphasised the task they were involved in and the result they wanted rather than individual success in reaching it:

I’ve also been responsible for leading a lot of change, which has been very difficult for a lot of people. So when this position became vacant it was almost incumbent upon me to act and repay the commitment that people had made to the sorts of change agendas that I had had, so that I would actually apply to be part of the next stage with them. (Female VC)

Collaboration and teams working together are contemporary management goals. At the time of interviews one university had a change agenda aimed at building shared values and responsibilities. When the University undertook a reshuffle in mid 2002, the press reported it was designed to bring together decision-makers at the university in cabinet-style meetings and to promote collective responsibility - a move to downplay the significance of the VC and 'the cult of the individual.' This was vividly shown in the move of the senior management team from a dark Victorian chancellery building with wood-panelled individual offices to open-plan offices in a modern high-rise building, a move welcomed by members of the team as enabling better discussion and decision-making. The female VC explained her belief in 'consultation and collaboration and sharing of empowerment':

I believe a manager really is only as good as the people who work for them and I believe you've got to give them the opportunities to use their initiative, you need to encourage them, you provide guidance, you help them work within the framework and I believe in open communication, transparency, acknowledgement of other people's achievements and helping them grow, both men and women. And that's the way I've always worked and I still work and I think it's been relatively successful. I have worked with men who also adopt that style. I'd say the majority though of the men I've worked for have not. I do think the world's changed a little bit though since I was first in sort of a management role. I believe in my experience men do not have the same openness, transparency and willingness to share. I think they see sharing information and praising and promoting of others as somehow diminishing their own authority and power instead of enhancing it. That's general, I notice. There's a lot more of wanting to win I suppose, win-lose sort of situation as opposed to win-win, yeah I think that's a general sin. So I do think the women I've worked with and certainly the style I've adopted, they're more likely to work the way I work than men.

A male Dean demonstrated his support for this management theory:

She has the view that, partly reading between the lines and partly from conversations, if you are going to make a decision, let's get people involved talking about the decision because it is very easy, if you don't do that, if it goes wrong, it is your fault because you made the wrong decision. And the more people involved in that decision, there is more commitment to making it happen. Or if it doesn't happen, it is partly my fault because I helped make a bad decision. So she is trying to spread responsibility, spread load and spread ownership. Because of what she is doing at a corporate level, she's getting the Deans operating a bit more corporately. (Male Dean)

Consultation

Billing (1994: 190) suggested: "The idea of a basic, essential contradiction between feminism and bureaucracy must be rejected. ... It seems to be possible to create 'soft' bureaucracies." She argued that women were able to break down hierarchies and combine management with a range of consultative techniques which involved all.

Women focussed on getting advice from a wide range of people and ensuring that their views were incorporated, rather than wanting to force their own views. This led to shared ownership of decisions wherever possible:

Well the VC said to me last year that I tend to do things, like it was talking about particularly about getting faculties to agree to things, and he said I tend to get around the back of the Deans and get them on side that way rather than trying to crash through or confront or whatever. So I think that's probably a particular gender style but it doesn't mean that I have the same style as the other women necessarily. ... (Female PVC)

In another university the female chief Librarian also described her commitment to this style of managing:

Well I think my management approach is probably what I've seen described in management text as being more typically feminine or female and that is, we do a lot of consultation and I would rather put in a solution to a problem that is 80 to 90% of the desirable solution but has buy in from all the stakeholders than try and drive through something I think is 100% right when I know people aren't buying into it. So we do a lot by consultation, compromise, collaboration within the library. And that's not only my style but it is also, I think, a library style and partly because librarianship is a female dominated profession. So I make less hard decisions and then try and drive them through the organisation, than I see other managers doing. And I try to let more of it come up from below and that's taken a long time.

Others valued the ways in which they had involved colleagues in projects:

In the last year of the Institute we were asked if we would have another five Centres from around the university join in a federation, a loose federation, and they were all male-led. And I was asked if I would be the executive director of that particular group of, as I called them, my merry men. And I decided that if I was going to go in feet first as boss we would never get anywhere because these were five or four other gentlemen who had always run their own particular centre with their own staff budgets etc. So I decided to take a very what I would term a softly softly approach and ask for cooperation and collaboration rather than a boss type approach and it worked extremely well. We got on very well and became extremely good friends. I don't know that a man would have taken that approach because what I did was really put my own power to one side and used my power within my own Centre but not in the overall. And when the decision was made to change the Institute six months ago then the amount of support I got from those men was quite fantastic and you know we all ended up very good friends. That takes a bit of doing.

Q: Do you think that is something that other women leaders do?

I think so. I watched other leaders within our university and to me the way women do get on is a. to listen, b. I think that they tend to take a softer line.

The women who I think have most difficulties in universities and I think this is why we are seeing some of the women who have gone into Vice-Chancellor's positions come very unstuck, is that they try to cope, they almost try to take a male role and I think any of us who have worked with men for a long time and most women in universities have, understand that you go so far into the male role but you still have got to keep your feminine side. (Female Director of Academic Centre)

To demonstrate that these management styles may not be gendered, it was clear that male leaders also practiced this collaborative consensual form of managing:

But I mean (male leader's) style of management was very, very inclusive and very low key and wanting all views to be heard ... And I think the Deans, at least I, felt very much a part of the team. (Female Dean)

The point was made however that women, no matter how dedicated to consensus building, were able to take the tough decisions:

I think if you asked the Vice-Chancellor about her management style or one of the other senior women they would all say that they tend... they're inclusive, they tend to want to talk to a lot of people, get a wide range of opinions. I do recognise the final call is with them so they exercise that authority when they need to. (Male PVC)

Both males and females tended to characterise women generally as being more inclusive, collaborative, cooperative, better at consensus building and as having strong communication skills.

Building Relationships

Emphasis was placed by both women and men on the importance of a welcoming environment and friendly relations with colleagues. Although women are stereotypically associated with more consultative and "collegiate" management styles, Hearn (1999) noted that collegiality in the university system is often a white middle class male version of collegiality. This perspective was not supported in our interviews. 'New' universities which have less traditional networks of mentoring and patronage may not have such rigidities. One institution was much praised as having a friendly culture. Here it is described by a male Pro-Vice-Chancellor recently appointed from a more "traditional" institution:

Anyone you speak to in this University who is a relatively recent arrival will almost certainly comment on that positive aspect of the place, that it is a pleasant place to work, that people do observe the basic levels of courtesy and friendliness.

A female Dean from the same institution suggested this environment was based on the warm relationship between the mixed-gender triumvirate in senior management, saying "They're really good mates." She attributed this to the character of some men in senior positions:

Our Vice-Chancellor, our previous Deputy Vice-Chancellor, certainly at least one of our Pro-Vice-Chancellors, are men who in many of their dealings would be seen as operating in a very female way and I think that's one of the reasons that women feel quite safe in this institution.

It is significant that while the male PVC described a pleasant place to work, the stakes for the female Dean were higher. A friendly workplace was "safe."

Many of the women expressed concern about the possibility of being isolated, ostracised or criticised. They valued personal support, particularly from the senior executive, and appreciated being backed in difficult staff negotiations:

I now realise that in this management position people don't necessarily trust me. They have all sorts of ideas about managers. I may be caring and supportive but also being a manager who wants to get things done might put you at odds sometimes. So reconciling who I thought I was with how people saw me as a manager ... has been very challenging for me emotionally. My supervisor has been very supportive, and the three people in the executive group (*note: all men*) have been really supportive of me in working that through (Female Director of Academic Centre).

Women leaders were described by some respondents as directly accessible, interactive and approachable:

You know I think it makes a difference having a Vice-Chancellor as a woman because it's partly because of who she is. I just feel like I can, I send her e-mails all the time you know. I think other woman do too and she reads them (Female Dean).

Discouragement of Competitive Behaviours

Communication styles are both a source and a result of gendered difference. And with the unequal balance of power within society it is not surprising that greater value is placed on masculine styles of communication. Thus assertiveness and getting your point of view agreed to are traits associated with masculinity and seen as an expression of strength. For many women, trying to seek consensus, such competitiveness provides a significant hurdle and a signifier of their 'difference':

I mean there's a couple of other Deans, one Dean in particular, two Deans in particular who are incredibly typically male Deans and I just can't imagine either of them doing the nurturing and emotional management stuff, right. If the place is falling apart and everybody hates their guts and you know everyone hates them, you know they don't even notice probably is my impression. And they are out there doing this, that and the other and taking lunch and setting up deals and God knows what, you know. And I just think, "Well it is just not what I do, you know. I can't." (Female Dean)

Such behaviours, of which many men would be deeply unconscious, were defined by women managers as threats to the collaborative and consensual decision making they were trying to introduce. A female Dean described in detail the constant work, which she described as 'emotional' work, to get an historically divided Faculty to cooperate and plan in a unified way:

It is one step forward, two steps back, or maybe two steps forward, one step back. Just really, really deep and entrenched squabbles and fights between people that go back, you know, and I can remember when they started and stuff like that. And so ... I always did the "Look guys we've got a problem here, we really have to solve it together. ... You know it is going to take all of us." You know dah, dah "Yeah right we're on board." So you'd go forward a bit and then it would kind of erupt somewhere, right. So you go back a bit and then you do the "No, no let's not get into that now. We know that, we know what you think about that but let's just move on." So just a lot of that sort of stuff I guess. Just intractable. I think academics are a little bit worse because they're more like nervy race horses or actors or something where it is about personal reputation and people are easily wounded and they can easily be made to feel insecure and stuff. So, you know just that and a lot of really bad behaviour. Oh dear. People who don't believe in common courtesy and civility and stuff.

This woman, explicitly involved in culture change within a Faculty, indicated that she constantly reminded members of committees "That's not the way we do that around here."

These occasional references to competitive behaviour in committees and meetings suggested that maintaining collaborative and cooperative behaviours still required effort and commitment. Increasing the number of women on committees, deliberately using techniques for broadening discussion and encouraging divergent thinking could be ways of controlling competitive meeting behaviours.

Innovation

Women were also described as innovative and as being prepared to take risks. A male PVC discussed approvingly his female Vice-Chancellor's 'intuition' in terms of taking actions. It might be that this quality emerged from women's more varied work experience. They came into senior positions not set on working in a particular set of ways. It could also be that in searching for results, women were prepared to look at novel solutions.

I think one of the advantages for the system of more women coming in in senior positions is that ... on balance I think it has brought more individuality into management and I think that's for the very reason that women will often lament, the fact that they haven't had the kind of networks and structures that have encouraged them. It seems to me a strange paradox that that has actually produced some very interesting people who've risen to senior positions with a more individual flavour, individual take on the world, than maybe some men have had, because I think men have been under greater pressure to conform to

a type who gets to the top. So far women haven't been under quite that same pressure and so ... there's a greater difference across the senior women that I know than across a comparable group of men in terms of their styles and their backgrounds. And it's a paradox because there are fewer of them ... And I think there's another reason. I think that women of a certain generation, certainly of my age, have often begun their careers without any expectation that they will rise to the top. They've often had time out and I think they bring in some respects, and this is a hopeless generalisation, a more philosophical aspect to the job, more of a capacity to see it as a job and not a life. Now whether that will change of course is one of the ironies of putting in support structures and networking and so on. You may well find that that changes over time. And I think in a way it would be a shame because I think one of the problems in Universities at the moment, in fact I'd say in the commercial sector as well as the private sector, is to place too high a value on a certain personality type that at the moment tends to be male. And not to acknowledge that if you look at the really successful CEOs of any organisations, by and large they don't actually fit any kind of mould. They're individuals and that's part of their strength and that's why people admire them and follow them. (Male PVC)

One male Dean described a highly collaborative relationship with a female colleague through which they had created a new and successful Faculty. The success of this innovation he attributed to the support of a senior woman. He was certain that the previous male Vice-Chancellor would not have countenanced such a change:

She gave us a break. ... (I)t wouldn't have happened without support from her and sometimes in the face of the previous Vice Chancellor when she was Deputy Vice Chancellor, she let us do some things that he would not have approved of but turned out for the better. She was right.

Yeatman (1995:200) argues that women derive strengths from their lack of background in the institutions. They can press for changes in the face of "all the fustian, patriarchal inefficiencies of the old institutional culture." Although the increased bureaucratisation and managerialism of universities has been much criticised, this can lead to scenarios where women as outsiders to the dominant mainstream masculinist cultures can be change agents or used as such by senior men. It has been suggested that the "contemporary managerialist, competitive, results-based environment" found in the public sector (Prichard, 1996) positions women to be such change agents. Marginality is symptomatic of oppression yet the same time a location for radical critique, creativity and openness (Davis, 1997).

The flexible work practices and innovation in curriculum often associated with the 'newer universities' have been described as another source of attraction for women (Ledwith and Manfredi, 2000) as women are less likely to stick to conservative practices. And in certain situations, women welcomed the opportunity afforded to them to experiment and take chances:

I've stayed here for 16 years which I think is just an amazing thing. So it's a culture that has suited me and probably I explain it by saying that anytime I

wanted to try something new they've always said, "Yes, go and do it." So it's a very encouraging culture in that respect (Female Dean).

Both men and women talked about the value of easy and collegial relationships between staff. There were expectations that women managers would be open and approachable. Both women and men emphasised the importance of a welcoming environment and friendly relations with colleagues. Women in particular wanted relationships that were based on honesty and approachability. The image of a boss who 'walked around' and was accessible to all staff was frequently cited as an ideal.

Staff and Students Valued

A female Dean indicated that she found the salary important; another that she enjoyed the "fun of sitting at the big table." But in general the women interviewed emphasised the intrinsic values of their jobs. One female Dean emphasised that she ran "a student-centred faculty," and said male Deans were more likely to focus on their own research, which was "portable." It was suggested that women tended to value staff and students more and give priority to encouraging others to fulfil potential as another female Dean emphasised:

I personally liked being Dean. About seventy percent of it is drudgery but what is very fulfilling about such a position is your ability to make things happen for other people, to see the potential that exists in activities and people and to be able to structure the kind of administrative systems and the resources so that you actually enable those things and spark them off.

Another female Dean endorsed this strong emotional commitment to education and to students:

I suppose I'm just excited by the core of what we do which is the research, the teaching, the contribution that you make to the community, the role of the intellectual. I have to say that it is the core of what we do. I couldn't imagine not doing that, not continuing to do it and not being with people that did it. I mean that's what excites. I genuinely get excited you know if somebody comes up with some new book or a new course or a new thought that they've found or a contribution that they've made, you just, it's exciting, you know you've made a difference to somebody's life. I mean graduation is just wonderful. You see all these kids beaming, they come up beaming, you know they've got something that they are going to use in some way to either get a job or transform them in some way. And I think that's what keeps me here rather than doing anything else, it's making a difference, people wise. I know that sounds like a cliché.

Billing and Alvesson (2000) suggested that the discourse of female leadership showed the role that women managers were expected to play. They were expected to be more caring, softer, more listening in comparison to men. These roles were typical of roles assigned to women in the private or domestic sphere. There was a potential downside to this emphasis on stereotypical feminine attributes for women managers. As Thomas and Davies found in their study on female academics in British universities, women felt that they "were locked into department maintenance activities and emotional work

in the department.” (2002: 381). As they observed, “it was *expected* that (women) should ‘naturally’ take on pastoral work as this equated with familial discourses of ‘women’s work’.” (387).

Some women in this study operated and enacted these female characteristics:

Females look at the small items, the small things. If you walk out and the receptionist is crying, I would say a male Dean would just continue walking, but a female Dean is going to notice it and come back later and find out why. Females seem to take more account of the people issues, and it’s the people who keep this place going. So that’s one small example of where I think there is a difference between a male and a female. It’s that we’re involved with the smaller details without allowing it to take us over.

Q: Does that apply to you?

Yes. Well I’m very observant, so you know if that’s happening and this is a problem over here and it’s a people problem and if it’s a people problem, it’s going to stop the workflows. So also it’s a little pragmatic in the approach. I think that’s a difference between males and females.

It was further suggested that male colleagues were not able to deal with emotions in the work place. A female administrator explained that she believed that her success in her job related to the relationships that she formed with her client group and overseas colleagues. She felt that her male colleagues were not able to deal with her in a similar way to her relationships with others. She emphasised that:

(t)he relationships did not overwhelm the commercial and business and the day-to-day administration I had to care for. In fact, I think they enhanced it. Whereas for a few of my male colleagues, I think in fact had they possibly given themselves permission to engage in some emotional, even dialogue with me, how they felt about some of the areas, it might have made our working relationship easier. Part of it I put down to a fear of engagement in an emotional dialogue or environment, because it is not seen as what men in senior positions do and I think that’s a sad thing and maybe something one needs to work on, in training for senior male managers... to let them see that they can have permission to do this and no one will think the worst of them. (Female Director)

This demonstrated that people operated within expectations of what sort of activity was acceptable in the work place and that relational work was not valued in general within the work place. A woman Dean explained how important she found the work of getting people into agreement and ensuring that all people in the faculty were kept informed and involved. She described the emotional cost to her:

It was really emotional work I found. I think any management position is probably emotional work because in order to get the best out of the people you actually have to work very hard to ameliorate the kind of conflicts and jealousies and paranoias that people have. And I don’t think it is just in academia, I think it is generally. And you have to use the force of, I don’t know, your will power and all your ability to make people feel safe or something. To just keep on damping

that down, just keeping in under control, making people see the pluses not the minuses and all of that jazz. So it is actually quite hard emotional work and I think I got to the point where I felt like I'd heard all the stories and I knew what everyone was going to say and they probably knew what I was going to say. And in the end I just thought I can't do another five years of this sort of emotional work.

There was a deeply held belief by both women and men that women in management were more empathetic and nurturing than male managers. Women's role in the family and role in the workplace were difficult to divide.

There were a number of references to women monitoring colleagues' hours at work and their health to ensure that people were not putting themselves under strain. These comments, emphasising that women are less individualistic, more concerned for people and more values-driven served to reinforce stereotypical ideas about women's role in society as nurturers and carers and as keepers of the domestic sphere. One female Dean described this process positively:

Sometimes I find my gender gives me a speaking space, an ability to say something, that I'm not sure as a bloke I would say, would be able to say.

She went on to describe how she expressed concern about colleagues coming straight to meetings after getting off planes.

Some women in senior positions tried to change these traditional views of how work must dominate lives, and this was appreciated by their colleagues, female and male.

I think the Vice Chancellor is very good about time. She insists everyone should have a day off a week. You know not feel that their job, that they should be doing their own thing so should be doing research or like she maintains the day when she tries to stay at home and do things and she's very keen on that. (Female Dean)

Others also noted how their female Vice-Chancellors had questioned them taking work home, believing that their senior managers needed to rejuvenate themselves.

This research clearly demonstrated that both men and women participants believed the presence of women at senior levels had influenced organisational cultures in the universities studied. Much of the discussion reflected perceptions about what is 'different' about women's approaches to managing. The key themes that emerged from this analysis were that when women are present, cultures at senior levels are believed to be more collaborative and consensual; there is more emphasis on building teams and individuals; more consultation; a change in styles of communication; less competitive behaviour; an emphasis on honesty and approachability; a greater level of balance, and a valuing of staff.

There are some provisos, however, that need to be considered in interpreting these findings. Many of the quotations cited in this section draw on beliefs about women's so-called capacity for nurturance and mothering, for caring, for being more compassionate and for showing a greater concern for people. There is considerable

debate about whether characteristics such as these that are traditionally associated with women are learnt as part of women's 'social script', or are innate. Regardless of the reason it is quite clear from this research that many women in senior management see themselves as enacting these characteristics in their workplace behaviours or at least believe they do. So do many of their male colleagues. What the findings would seem to suggest therefore is that this can lead to a perception imagined or otherwise that women are better at handling the emotional side of organisational life (James, 1993). In a recent critique of the concept of feminine leadership Billing and Alvesson (2000) argued that the discourse of women's 'emotional intelligence' not only reinforced stereotypical views on women but also demanded from women emotional commitment that was time-demanding and exhausting. Therefore, it was not surprising that many of the women referred to the emotional investments they made in the organisation as being particularly demanding as well as adding to the long hours and relentless pressure under which they worked.

The findings of the present research would seem to suggest that a critical mass of women at senior levels creates an environment where a range of management styles is accepted. It is not however suggested that there is a causal relationship between the presence of women in senior management and the changes in culture that participants believe have taken place in these universities. There are many other factors that can impact on an organisation's culture – changes in higher education in the years since women have entered management would, for instance, be another factor. It can be seen, nevertheless, that establishing and maintaining cultures that have the attributes discussed in this section of the report seem to flow from having more women at senior levels in the organisation. Perhaps more importantly change seems more likely to take place when women (and men) are committed to embedding these characteristics in the culture of their organisation.

Conclusion

The results of this research project suggest that the most important issue in making changes to academic management is whether women are present in a "critical mass" and most particularly if they are in senior positions so that they can make a difference. The women no longer saw themselves as tokens in academic leadership. Most of our female participants were at ease with their male colleagues and confident of their capacity to influence events and to effect changes. Many of the women expressed great enthusiasm about their positions and what they had been able to achieve. They were aware that they approached management differently to men. They particularly emphasised how they worked with staff and students to encourage them to develop. Women also emphasised focussing on values. They highlighted the importance of collaboration and consultation over hierarchical management.

Many of the men interviewed were committed supporters of their female colleagues. They appreciated their contributions, acknowledged women as important in innovation and in bringing values to the work-place. They noted the changes that had occurred in managerial cultures as a result of the presence of women, describing workplaces as friendly and 'more normal.'

It is a matter of importance to the future of universities that issues of management, gender and cultural change continue to be discussed and confronted. Universities have broken down hierarchies and moved to more collaborative, consultative forms of management. In these circumstances, university managers see that women are contributing successfully to rebuilding cultures in universities.

References

Australian Bureau of Statistics (2003), Labour Force Australia.

Bacchi, C. (1998) 'Changing the Sexual Harassment Agenda,' Mackinnon, A. and Gatens M. (eds) *Gender and Institutions: Welfare, Work and Citizenship*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Billing, Y. (1994) 'Gender and Bureaucracies – A Critique of Ferguson's The Feminist Case Against Bureaucracy,' *Gender, Work and Organization* 1(4): pp 179-193.

Billing, Y. and Alvesson, M. (2000) 'Questioning the Notion of Feminine Leadership: A Critical Perspective on the Gender Labelling of Leadership' *Gender, Work and Organization* 7(3): pp 144-157.

Crompton, R. and Le Feuvre, N. (1992) 'Gender and bureaucracy: women in finance in Britain and France' in M. Savage and A. Witz (eds), *Gender and Bureaucracy*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Davis, K. (1997) 'What's a Nice Girl Like You Doing in a Place Like This? The Ambivalences of Professional Feminism,' Stanley, L. (ed) *Knowing Feminisms*. London: Sage.

Ely, R. (1995) 'The Power of Demography: Women's Social Constructions of Gender Identity at Work,' *Academy of Management Journal*. 38 (3): pp 589-635.

Eveline, J. (2004) *Ivory Basement Leadership: Power and Invisibility in the Changing University*, Perth: UWA Press

Hearn, J. (1999) 'Men, Managers and Management: The Case of Higher Education,' Whithead, S. and Moodley, R. (eds) (1999) *Transforming Managers: Gendering Change in the Public Sector*. London: UCL Press.

Ledwith, S. and Manfredi, S. (2000) 'Balancing Gender in Higher Education: A Study of the Experience of Senior Women in a 'New' UK University.' *European Journal of Women's Studies*.

Meyerson, D. and Ely, R. 2003. Using difference to make a difference. In D. Rhode (Ed.) *The difference "difference" makes: women and leadership*. California. Stanford University Press

Power, Michael (1997) *The Audit Society: Rituals of Verification*. Oxford. Clarendon Press.

Prichard, C. (1996). 'Managing universities: is it men's work?' Collinson, D. and Hearn, J. (eds), *Men as Managers, Managers as Men: Critical Perspectives on Men, Masculinities and Managements*. London: Sage. Pp 227-238.

Sheppard, D. (1992) 'Women manager's perceptions of gender and organizational life' in A. Mills and P. Tancred (eds), *Gendering Organisational Analysis*. Newbury Park: Sage

Thomas, R. and Davies, A. (2002) 'Gender and New Public Management: Reconstituting Academic Subjectivities' *Gender, Work and Organization* 9(4): pp 371-397.

Yeatman, A. (1995) 'The Gendered Management of Equity Oriented Change in Higher Education,' J. Smyth, (ed) *Academic Work*, Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

